

The Papers of Thomas A. Edison, Volume 1: The Making of an Inventor, February 1847-June 1873. Edited by Reese V. Jenkins et al. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Illustrations, appendixes, index. lxviii, 776 pp. \$65. ISBN 0-8018-3100-8.®

The life of Thomas A. Edison was without precedent in American industrial history. Edison was a hybrid whose career bridged the gap between his antecedent, the individualist inventor, and his eventual successor, the scientifically trained researcher working within an institutional context. During his long working life, and in the years since his death, Edison's life transcended reality and entered into the realm of mythology.

Popular biographies have fostered simplistic interpretations of Edison's life and have provided the most rudimentary facts about his achievements. While Edison obtained 1,093 U.S. patents during his long career, many of his less well-known innovations have been routinely overlooked. Furthermore, Edison's ability to bring his common sense to bear upon solving the practical problems of his day have been ig-

nored as have been the precise details of his formative years.

The documentary record now available shows that Edison was not an unsophisticated businessman. Nor was he “the lone inventor who single-handedly made miraculous inventions, an uneducated tinkerer who mindlessly tested everything, bumbling onto technical breakthroughs, and, by a streak of luck, transformed the world.” Edison the inventor was a shrewd businessman capable of raising capital, securing patents, forming partnerships, and marketing his inventions.

Close examination of the records reveals that as a young inventor, Edison was well-educated, well-read in the scientific literature of his day, and possessed of a thorough knowledge of both scientific methodologies and business practices, particularly those within the telegraph industry. Edison was a man who recognized the value of teamwork and sought to surround himself with knowledgeable associates who, in turn, enabled him to embrace multiple technologies.

With the publication of *The Papers of Thomas A. Edison, Volume 1: The Making of an Inventor*, many myths surrounding Edison’s early life are dispelled. Much of what has been accepted as truth may now be dismissed as apocrypha. This first volume, containing 90 percent of all known documents relating to Edison’s boyhood and early career, chronicles his childhood to age 26 when his experiments in telegraphy paved the way for his future inventions and commercial failures as well as his successes.

The Edison Papers Editorial Project, located at Rutgers University, was established in an effort to find answers within the documentary record to unexamined questions raised by Edison’s life and work. The completed twenty-volume series will contain over 7,000 documents and thousands of original sketches and drawings selected from the 3.5 million pages left by Edison, most of which are in the archives

of the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, New Jersey. Through the work of the editorial project, the papers are being made publicly available for the first time.

The editors of this annotated illustrated edition have selected as their audience serious scholars who have yet to reach a common understanding of Edison’s career, and general readers who have fallen prey to the Edison myth. The introductory essay to the first volume identifies the relevant historical issues and relates them to the documentary evidence contained in the book. Headnotes, endnotes, and annotations throughout the text describe the contexts in which the documents were created and allow readers to follow at levels of understanding commensurate with their relative technical expertise.

In selecting an editorial apparatus, the editors have avoided the “clear text” approach which employs neither critical symbols nor note numbers, but buries all the editorial emendations in notes at the end of the volume. As justification for this decision, we are told, “it is important that the readers of this edition have the evidence of Edison’s creative mind at work—that they see the first primitive sketches of a new design, sense the hurried hand that makes false verbal starts, leaves out letters in words, and disregards the conventions of capitalization and punctuation; and note the evidence of Edison’s verbal facility as well as his visual-spatial capabilities.”

The virtues of this volume are several. The collected documents function as a corrective to earlier biographies, and also serve to set a research agenda for future inquiry. Because invention as an activity is seldom studied, Edison’s working papers and correspondence become a valuable tool for further research. Edison’s life and career were emblematic of this country’s move away from its rural-agrarian culture to an urban-industrial one and his papers chronicle the emergent business, economic, labor, and social issues of the period. His

life, as reflected in his papers, provides a lens through which we may view contemporary society as we approach the next century.

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